Fairbury Optometrist Nationally Known Expert on Cigar Store Indians

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Anthony Whitford Pendergast was born in 1879 in Indiana. There were 11 children in his family. He attended local schools in Harrison County, Indiana. As a newsboy in his youth, Pendergast was fascinated by the cigar store "Indians" he saw all around the streets of his home town. This fascination started a life-long interest in collecting and repairing cigar store Indians. After finishing his local Indiana schools, he then attended and in 1899 graduated from the Chicago College of Ophthalmology.

In the 1900 U.S. Census, Anthony was living with his parents in Harrison County, Indiana. On the Census, he listed his occupation as a grocery store clerk. In 1902, at the age of 23, he married Inez Mae Tucker in Terre Haute, Indiana. Inez was 22 years old.

After they married, they moved to Fairbury, and he opened his own optometry office. In 1904, their first child, Marcella June Pendergast, was born. In 1909, son Lyman Maxwell Pendergast was born. In the early years of his practice, Dr. Pendergast drove a horse and buggy as far as Lexington and Chenoa. He would trade eyeglasses for anything, including chickens or eggs.

In the 1910 U.S. Census, Dr. A. W. Pendergast was operating his own eye doctor's office in Fairbury. His family was living at 304 East Elm Street. Dr. Pendergast had several hobbies. One of these was collecting Native American artifacts such as arrowheads in Fairbury fields. He became friends with famed Fairbury artifact collector Ben Nussbaum.

Another of his hobbies was collecting, restoring, and selling old cigar store Indian figures. He became nationally known for his expertise in repairing these figures.

In January of 1941, Mrs. Pendergast was killed in a car accident on an icy road by Weston. She was 58 years old, and funeral services were held in Terre Haute, Indiana. Within a few months of his wife's death, Dr. Pendergast sold his Fairbury house, and he moved to Terre Haute, Indiana.

In May of 1941, Dr. Pendergast moved 13 of his cigar store Indians from Fairbury to his new home in Terre Haute, Indiana. Each of the 13 statues was placed in a heavy-duty cardboard box in the back of his brother's delivery truck. Then each box was filled with sand. This method allowed the figures to stand up in their normal orientation while they shipped. Dr. Pendergast estimated the value of the 13 statues was $4,500. This value would be equivalent to $79,200 in today's dollars. All the figures were transported safely to Dr. Pendergast's new home in Terre Haute.

Helen E. Joyner was born in 1888 in Clinton, Indiana. She married Cassius Malone, and they had one child, Harold Malone. Mr. Cassius Malone died in 1944. Shortly after her first husband died, Helen married Dr. A. W. Pendergast in Terre Haute, Indiana.

During World War II, a series of short movie clips were produced, and they were titled Unusual Occupations. They were typically only one to two minutes each in length. In 1942, one of these clips was made featuring Dr. Pendergast in his Terre Haute workshop. This movie was filmed just after he had moved from Fairbury to Terre Haute. In the short clip, Dr. Pendergast is shown restoring an old cigar store Indian. Part of his collection of figures is also shown. This old video can still be viewed at https://tinyurl.com/v5edk56.

In 1953, Dr. Pendergast and W. Porter Ware jointly published a book titled Cigar Store Figures in American Folk Art. In their publication on the cigar store figure, Dr. Pendergast and co-author W. Porter Ware stated that the earliest evidence of cigar store figures dated them to as early as 1600 in the city of Amsterdam. In that city, a tobacconist's shop had a figure of an American black slave as his sign, because of the association between slaves and tobacco. The tradition was continued in England, and the statues began to look more like American Indians, usually with feathered headdresses, often holding a pipe or a roll of tobacco leaves.

The book also noted that not all the figures were of Indians or slaves. As their popularity spread, "Turks," "Moors," Scotsmen, jockeys, Roman characters, mythological figures, and others were used. Antiquarian John L. Morrison, cited by Mr. Pendergast in his 1953 book Cigar Store Figures, stated that the first appearance of a cigar store "Indian" in America was in 1770 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the cigar store figure (usually an Indian) was as much a symbol of the tobacco trade as the barber pole was of barbershops. Mr. Pendergast owned at least two hundred figures during his lifetime and was a noted expert on the genre. He sold many figures to other collectors and had a workshop where he repaired and reconditioned the figures.

In 1961, Dr. Pendergast died at the age of 81 in Terre Haute, Indiana. He was buried near his first wife, Inez Pendergast, in the Terre Haute Highland Lawn Cemetery.

Just a few years ago, Dr. Pendergast's collection of Native American artifacts was sold piece by piece on eBay. Photographs of many of these individual pieces are part of the Fairbury Echoes Museum collection.

At some point, someone donated two boxes of Dr. Pendergast's materials about cigar store Indians to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC. The museum notes that Fairbury optometrist, Dr. Anthony W. Pendergast was a collector, author, antiquarian, dealer, and authority on the subject of cigar store figures. The collection includes correspondence and newspaper clippings on Pendergast and his various folk art collections. It also has a scrapbook of photographs and miscellaneous materials relating to cigar store figures. There is also a large number of black and white pictures of figures from his personal collection, mostly for use in selling the figures. Unfortunately, Dr.

Pendergast's Smithsonian collection has not yet been digitized, and can only be reviewed by visiting Washington, DC.

Dr. Pendergast preserved history in several different ways. Various new owners are preserving his collection of Native American artifacts. He saved and repaired many cigar store Indians and related figures. He sold some of his refurbished figures to the Chicago Field Museum and the Smithsonian. His legacy is his 1942 Unusual Occupation movie clip, his 1953 book about cigar-store figures, and his collection of information preserved by the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC.